

## U3A BIRDWATCHING GROUP Report by Andrew Lapworth

### 20th May 2024: Visit to High Helbeck in Low Cloud

We were fortunate this month to have an invitation by group member Nicolete for us to have a conducted tour of High Helbeck, high up in the North Pennines off the road between Middleton-in-Teesdale and Brough. Eight of us met at the designated lay-by; the previous weekend's sunny weather had vanished and instead we experienced low cloud and cool temperatures, but at least it didn't rain. From the cars we could hear numerous Curlews calling and an agitated Redshank, even though we could only glimpse them in the mist and low cloud.

Nicolete took us along the designated and well-signposted 3.5 mile trail, described as of moderate walking difficulty "...with some steep terrain.... the ground being boggy in places". We soon caught sightings of Lapwings, Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, and Grey Wagtails alongside the waterfalls and becks. Kestrels and Buzzards were spotted, as well as noisy Greylag Geese.

This upland, moorland site, new to most of us, is being turned into an exciting natural landscape; Nicolete and her husband have embarked on a long-term project to restore natural regeneration of trees and meadows and other ecological enhancements. New scrapes to make wetlands have been made to improve biodiversity, with thousands of trees and shrubs planted. Nicolete explained they wanted to demonstrate a successful working partnership approach between upland landowners, Natural England, The Woodland Trust and the RSPB.

We were soon being tested on our knowledge of British Prime Ministers: landscape zones have been given names to aid locations; we walked through Aberdeen, Portland and even "Parliament Square" but unfortunately didn't get to trample over Truss. En-route we came to the stone barn where we had our picnic lunch on the outside benches and admired the new composting toilet thoughtfully provided. We got to see the ubiquitous and noisy Oystercatchers, plus Stonechats, and Dippers; Willow Warblers were singing from the new plantations. Reed Buntings and Chaffinches were added to our list, with fleeting views of Black Grouse. Towards the end of the walk we separated aerial Swifts from the Swallows, all swooping low to catch insects.

All in all an illuminating walk to see a special and unique landscape restoration project. Many of us were encouraged to come back to enjoy the walk again, hopefully in warmer and sunnier weather when we could appreciate better the far views to the Eden Valley and distant Howgills. Our many thanks to Nicolete for leading this outing over their special bit of the North Pennines.  
Lunchtime for birdwatchers at High Helbeck

